Looking Back at the Labor Party: An Interview with Mark Dudzic

written by Derek Seidman | March 24, 2014

In the 1990s, hundreds of U.S. labor activists came together to form the Labor Party. The initiative was the brainchild of Tony Mazzocchi, the passionate leader of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers International Union (which, after two mergers, is today part of the United Steelworkers). Mazzocchi held true to the dream of an independent political party rooted in the labor movement over which working people would have ownership. He was fond of pointing out: “The bosses have two parties. We need one of our own.”

By the mid-1990s, it seemed as if Mazzocchi’s dream was on its way to becoming a reality. In June 1996, nearly 1,500 trade unionists met in Cleveland to found the Labor Party. It was an impressive turnout, marked by a sense of excitement and debate as well as daunting challenge.

By any measure, the delegates had a formidable task ahead of them. Periodic attempts to form labor parties in the U.S., going back as far as the 19th century, had all eventually flopped. But coming out of the 1996 convention, the Labor Party had strong leadership, institutional backing, favorable external conditions, and high hopes.

A decade after the founding convention, the Labor Party still existed in name, but outside of a few local pockets it was essentially defunct. For several years it twisted and turned through a series of interesting experiments and navigated some tricky internal tensions. Organizers did their best to sustain the Labor Party through difficult circumstances. But ultimately it failed to last.

In 2013, it is still hard to find much thoughtful analysis of the history of the Labor Party and the lessons we could derive from it. (An exception is a recent essay by Mark Dudzic and Katherine Isaac.) This is unfortunate, because many of the dilemmas that the Labor Party confronted remain with us today. Moreover, its strategies for overcoming those obstacles and its vision of how a genuine working class party should operate may prove useful in thinking about how to move beyond the current impasse. It's vital that we engage with the history of the Labor Party in order to make better sense of the path forward.

This interview is meant as a contribution to that process of reflection. It is intended to serve as both an introduction to the history of the Labor Party as well as a critical look at its life and legacies. It surveys the lead up to the Labor Party’s founding, its basic goals and philosophy, its strategic orientation, and its development over the course of a decade. It gauges the Party’s successes, shortcomings, external obstacles, and internal debates. It also tries to extract lessons from the Labor Party’s history and to offer some insight into the perils and promise of the current conjuncture. The interview is organized into four parts: Origins and Philosophy; Party Life and Internal Debates; The Labor Party and Left Strategy; and Looking Back, Looking Ahead. It was conducted in late 2012 over both email and telephone.

Mark Dudzic has a long history in the American labor movement. He became the National Organizer of the Labor Party after the death of Tony Mazzocchi in 2002. Before that he was president of Local 8-149 of OCAW for nearly two decades. He is currently the National Coordinator for the Labor Campaign for Single Payer Healthcare. A unifying thread over the course of Dudzic’s career has been his constant engagement with broad questions of how to strengthen labor’s power and

independent political voice. As Dudzic says below, "We need to encourage a broad and open discussion of Labor Party history and lessons within the labor movement." This interview was done in that spirit.

PART I: ORIGINS AND PHILOSOPHY

Tony Mazzocchi was instrumental in developing the idea of the Labor Party and helping it to get off the ground. Before we get into the nuts and bolts of the party's founding, can you talk about Mazzocchi, who he was, what he envisioned, and why he was able to play the role he did?

Tony was an extraordinary and visionary leader. He was born in 1926 in Brooklyn. At 16, he joined the Army and fought in World War II. After the war, he bummed around on the GI Bill for a while and then hired into the Helena Rubinstein cosmetics factory in New York City where the workers were represented by a union that would become the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union (now part of the Steelworkers). Over the next 30 years he was elected shop steward, chief steward, local president, international executive board member, OCAW Legislative Director, and OCAW Vice President. He ran, as an opposition candidate, for OCAW President in 1979 and 1981 and lost both elections by less than 3% of the vote. He was elected OCAW Secretary-Treasurer in 1988 on a unity slate and then served as the Labor Party National Organizer from 1992 until his death in 2002.

Mazzocchi was involved in most of the progressive initiatives embraced by sections of the postwar labor movement, including the civil rights struggle and movements against nuclear proliferation and the war in Viet Nam. He led the fight for the passage of the Occupational Health and Safety Act in 1970 and worked to establish the first labor and environmental alliances. He framed these issues as a fight against corporate power.

His worldview was shaped by his experiences in World War II and the postwar GI Bill—where he witnessed the capacity of the state to mobilize immense resources to both wage war and to redeploy them for peaceful purposes—and by his exposure to the New York City labor left before it was crushed during the Cold War years. He was the prototype of the worker intellectual and had a voracious appetite for knowledge and culture that he shared with those around them. He had an inclusive leadership style which served him well in the hundreds of union halls he visited in his career. Most of all, he had an unshakeable confidence in the capacity of working people to create change.

So the attempt to build a labor party consumed much of the final decade of Mazzocchi's life. But the inability to sustain a viable, independent working class party has been one of the historic frustrations for the American left. Can you explain the context surrounding the lead up to the Labor Party's formation in 1996? What factors made Mazzocchi and his allies think that the 1990s were an apt time to initiate such an ambitious project?

The impetus to launch a labor party movement came out of two trends in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The first was the collapse of the post-war collective bargaining regime and the rise of neoliberalism. This trend emerged in full force in the late 1970s and was responsible for the orgy of union busting, deindustrialization, and attacks on the social insurance model of the Reagan years. At first, most of the institutional labor movement assumed that this was a temporary aberration and that their "seat at the table" would be restored by appealing to more reasonable sections of the corporate ruling class and more vigorous political action and lobbying directed at Democrats and moderate Republicans.

By the late 1980s, a growing section of the labor movement was beginning to realize that

neoliberalism had triumphed and the new structures of global capitalism had marginalized the labor movement and made it virtually impossible to pursue working class interests through the (admittedly flawed) postwar pattern of negotiation and compromise within multi-class political parties. The failed Kennedy and Jackson insurgencies led many to conclude that the Democratic Party could no longer be expected to represent even a compromised version of working class and popular interests. This realization was more widely held by leaders at the local and regional levels of the labor movement but by the 1990s a growing number of national leaders also began to realize that labor's days were numbered and the old system was collapsing.

It should be noted that Mazzocchi laid out this perspective as early as 1979. In his campaign for president of the OCAW in that year, he warned that the 1980s were going to "come at us like a freight train" and that the union needed to transform itself by building new alliances and girding for a fight. His opponent ridiculed him for being an alarmist and predicted that the 1980s would be "just like the 1950s, the 1960s, the 1970s. Sure, we'll have our fights, but there is no need to run around saying the sky is falling."

The other emerging trend was the re-birth of a "labor left" which, with few exceptions, had been red-baited out of the institutional labor movement in the 1940s. A new generation of leaders and activists began to emerge who had come of age in the 1960s and were committed to a vision of social unionism. Many had ties to movements to empower women and people of color. Many were radicalized by fights against concessions and union busting. In addition, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War weakened the ties between the institutional labor movement and U.S. imperial foreign policy resulting in a new tolerance, and the occasional embrace, of viewpoints that would have been beyond the pale during the Cold War years.

By the mid-90s, the labor movement was undergoing a bit of a resurgence. A number of creative and militant fights against concessions had captivated an activist base and a new generation of leaders embraced an "organizing model of unionism." In 1995, the "New Voices" slate swept into office in the only contested election in the history of the AFL-CIO promising to organize a million new members a year. All of these efforts came up against the reality that the Democratic Party was dominated by corporate interests and was obstructing the potential of a revitalized labor movement. President Clinton's advocacy of the NAFTA agreement was, to many, the final nail in the coffin of the Democratic Party.

How would you describe the Labor Party's basic philosophy as it got underway? What, concretely, were its central goals, and what were its strategies for achieving those goals?

In one of the early educational sessions prior to the launching of Labor Party Advocates, an OCAW member came up with the Labor Party's slogan: "The bosses have two parties. It's time we had one of our own." Different forces brought different perspectives to the table. Some had an ideological commitment to a labor party as part of a broader socialist project. Others just wanted to teach the Democrats a lesson that they couldn't be taken for granted. In between, there was a broad base of folks who wanted to build a labor-based political party as the cornerstone of an anti-corporate movement that built working class power. There was a palpable disenchantment with the Democratic Party and the Clintonian version of neoliberalism. Many looked to the Canadian New Democratic Party (which many International Unions with Canadian members participated in) as an example of how a minority party could help set the terms of political debate. The newly formed Brazilian Workers Party and other working class political insurgencies around the world also provided context for understanding how a party of labor could function in a neoliberal world.

There was never an explicit initial organizing strategy and opening goal but I would say that there was a broad consensus on how to proceed. The goal was to move a significant section of the

institutional labor movement into a commitment to work towards a break with the Democratic Party and active support for the launching of the Labor Party. We started with a recognition that the labor movement could not afford to immediately disengage from all of its political entanglements in a two-party, winner-takes-all system. We called for movement-building to precede electoral politics and for building a working class constituency rather than just mobilizing an already activated base. We recognized that efforts to build a movement by convening a body of self-appointed leaders with a shopping list of demands for the working class to follow were doomed to failure. Rather, we focused on building a broad movement of working-class institutions, leaders, and activists to speak on our own behalf. We avoided the expediency of identity politics and liberal talking points and instead organized around broad class-based interests and concerns.

The Labor Party promised a "new organizing model of politics." What did this mean?

The “new organizing model for politics” said that electoral politics was situated in the broader project to build working class organization and politics. It said that we would enter electoral politics from a position of strength. We set substantial requirements for electoral intervention to assure that any effort was serious and geared towards building capacity. Standards included formal support from a substantial portion of the labor movement in the targeted constituency, the ability to raise enough funds to run a credible campaign and the presence of an organization in the constituency that could mobilize voters and activists at the precinct-level. Candidates had to be accountable to a formal Labor Party structure and the Labor Party would not run or endorse candidates on other party lines.

This model recognized that, for working people, the stakes for breaking with the Democratic Party were high and that any formal electoral effort had to be serious and strategic. It also was informed by the failures of many “insurgencies” within the Democratic Party and by labor-based political parties elsewhere in the industrialized world where candidates and elected officials were not held accountable to working class constituencies and were co-opted or corrupted.

Who were the key players involved in the internal discussions that shaped the Labor Party’s early groundwork and founding?

Many of the early players in labor party advocacy came out of the OCAW. The union had a unique history of rank-and-file control and militant activism. In 1988 a slate led by Bob Wages and Tony Mazzocchi won national office. They pledged to explore the possibility of building a labor party and embarked upon an internal discussion and education program that resulted in the commitment of significant institutional support for the project and the mobilization of local leaders and activists who became organizers in their workplaces and their communities.

Other unions followed similar paths. Some like the UE (United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America) and the west coast longshore union (ILWU) had been historic advocates of independent working class politics. Others, like the Mineworkers (UMWA) and the railroad Maintenance of Way workers (BMWE) had undergone internal transformations similar to the OCAW or, like the California Nurses Association, had emerged from a period of internal struggle to embrace a new vision of social unionism. Organizations that sought to organize marginalized and excluded workers like the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) and the Kensington Welfare Rights Union (KWRU) also responded to the call. In addition, Mazzocchi was in contact with hundreds of rank-and-file activists and union dissidents who saw the labor party movement as a central part of a program to build working class power.

From the beginning, we were careful to ensure that the leadership of the labor party movement consisted of people who actually represented workers and could bring institutional commitments

and resources to the table. The first meeting of the interim steering committee of Labor Party Advocates (the organizing committee that evolved into the Labor Party in 1996) took place in Chicago in 1993. The 80 union leaders in attendance represented over half a million workers.

You mentioned some of the unions and other organizations that got behind the Labor Party initially. Could you explain why these specific unions and groups – and not others – got behind the Labor Party idea?

A lot of the groups that came to the Labor Party either came from traditions where they were looking for an alternative political strategy, like the UE and ILWU, the remnants of the CIO Left from the 1940s, or they had undergone some kind of internal transformation based on confronting the new realities of the 1980s with the labor movement. This is what happened with my union, the OCAW. It was happening with a lot of local unions, a lot of groups. The Teamsters were coming together around reform movements. Ron Carey was elected Teamsters President in 1991, rejoining the AFL-CIO (which set the stage for the Sweeney victory in 1995) and embracing an aggressive mobilization and bargaining strategy. So those were the kinds of people that came together on this. They were looking for an alternative. They were responsive to the message and they had leaderships that were either trying to be accountable to rank-and-file movements within their unions or were trying to start those movements themselves.

You also mentioned "social unionism" and you associate many of the Labor Party supporters with this idea. Can you explain more what you mean by "social unionism" and why it was important to the project of the Labor Party?

I would say that social unionism, at its most fundamental, understands that workers are a class with interests that go beyond a particular bargaining relationship that they may have with an employer. It understands also that employers are part of a capitalist class which seeks unrestricted, hegemonic control in all spheres of society. In practice, this understanding means that unions must align the interests and struggles of their members with those of the entire working class and contest capital for power in all social spheres. It is the old solidarity unionism—"an injury to one is an injury to all"—writ large.

Going back, you said that there were 80 unions at the Labor Party's founding that represented roughly half a million workers. It seems like you were trying to make this a party that was – concretely and substantively, not just symbolically or rhetorically – composed of and led by actual leaders, organizers, and rank-and-file members of the labor movement. Can you speak about that kind of model, and how it's different from other existing parties?

That was central to what we felt had to happen. We felt that if you have a party of labor you have to have a significant percentage of the labor movement in the room and at the table at all times. We felt that the people who were going to move this were people who were really representative of the actually-existing labor movement. Those were the folks that we needed to win over, and not necessarily the top national leaders. The base of the Labor Party was always local and regional, leaders of different union formations. Those are the folks who could really move the issue and who could really speak on behalf of a constituency. So, that was very important. And then Tony always had this dictum that "If you can't get it passed in your own union hall, don't bring it to a broader organization." This hit on the need to connect whatever politics you were doing to a real institutional and living and breathing constituency. So, that was just our style from the very beginning. It's easy to get a hundred leftists together and put together a shopping list of political issues that we want to organize around. You can lay that out, but it doesn't have any kind of reality beyond the names on that list and the issues on that list.

You also said that the Canadian New Democratic Party (NDP) and the Brazilian Workers' Party were inspirations. What about them excited you and how do you see their examples as relating to the scene in the U.S.?

The NDP was interesting. First of all, because a lot of unions had direct experience with it, so it was accessible and was comfortable to the union culture. And you had the model of the passage of single-payer healthcare that was led by the NDP even though they didn't actually hold power in any province except Saskatchewan. They were a minority power nationally, but they were able to, as Tony always used to say, seize the terms of debate and move a working-class agenda with a national political basis. That was really important. And then you had these exciting new movements in the context of neoliberalism. For 10 or 15 years, all we heard from both the Reagan/Thatcher people and a lot of the older labor and Social Democratic parties was "there is no alternative," you've got to accommodate yourself to the market culture. And then you have these parties like the Brazilian Workers Party which, particularly in that moment, seemed to be very fresh and developing momentum, developing a class-based movement that was challenging that neoliberal model. So it was very exciting to people. And it had developed in places like Korea, where the labor movement kind of exploded during that period, the South African experiences. All this really motivated a lot of folks.

That phrase Tony Mazzocchi used, "seize the terms of the debate," is interesting. Was that a goal of the Labor Party? And what was the overall strategy in terms of pursuing it?

I think that was part of the first goal of the Labor Party. The real goal of the Labor Party was to build a world that represented working peoples' concerns and served their interests. But I think that the first goal that we set for ourselves was that, if we could build this powerful movement, then we could pull the debate back into what it would take to build that kind of a world, rather than the debates that we'd been having for the last 30 years about how to accommodate to this new world. So, that was really crucial, and I think that was very clarifying when Tony and others laid it out that way. It really helped clarify what needed to happen before anything else happened.

Let's shift to another topic. Historically, labor has been committed to the Democrats, and Mazzocchi recognized a problem here: unions won't abandon the Democrats for a labor party that can't promise victory and may be an electoral spoiler, but at the same time, it would be impossible to build a labor party that could compete electorally if it didn't have the support of unions. What was the Labor Party's strategy for confronting this dilemma?

Our party-building model was premised on the understanding that you cannot have a party of labor that does not have at the table a substantial portion of the actually-existing labor movement. The Labor Party had to start with the assurance that it wouldn't play spoiler politics and that it would focus on building the critical mass necessary for serious electoral intervention. This was easier to envision in the political context of the 1990s where the Democratic Party was clearly aligning itself with a neoliberal, anti-worker agenda and the labor movement was struggling with how to overcome decades of decline and regain the offensive. It was not inconceivable that a trade union movement that was organizing a million workers a year and confronting corporate power in the workplace would throw its weight behind an effort to build a class-based political movement. The strategic defeat of this effort to revitalize the labor movement changed the political calculus. By the early years of the new millennium, most unions had reverted to a survival mode that precluded the embrace of transformative efforts like the Labor Party.

Let's go a little deeper into this question of elections, because it was one of the crucial issues within the Labor Party. Some party activists disagreed with the official position to wait on elections until you could legitimately compete. They said, basically, if you're a

party, you run in elections anyways to spread your ideas, build support, and justify your existence. How would you respond to this? If the Labor Party wasn't going to be an actual electoral party until it built up a base, should it have remained something else, something less than a party? And if so, base-building and expanding your constituency without becoming a party could take years, even decades. Is it possible to sustain that kind of grassroots effort, the energy, morale, unity, excitement, and so on, without running in elections?

First of all, in retrospect, I think it was premature for us to coalesce into a party formation without an understanding of how we would relate to elections. That was a problem. And again, it was because of the rapid growth of the Labor Party movement, which was connected to the broader rapid growth of the revitalized expectations around the labor movement overall. Leaders like Mazzocchi were really trying to put a damper on the demand to move from Labor Party Advocates to a full-blown party, but it sort of ran away from us. So yes, that is a problem.

But secondly, my experience with elections is that they've been very disempowering. They haven't really been a way to organize or raise issues. Without a permanent, structural presence that goes beyond elections, they leave very little in their wake. You get all excited and you mobilize a base around an individual campaign. But it disappears when that individual loses, or worse when they gain power and you have no effective way to use that office and hold that person accountable. And they drift off into some kind of sell-out structure. I've been involved in the Jesse Jackson movement – in fact, in New Jersey they established some longer-term institutional presences, some other candidates over time – but they rarely leave much behind them beyond the initial excitement of the person. So I'm not sure that's an effective way to build a permanent organization.

And then I would say, really, when we struggled with this issue – and I think we came out with a really brilliant understanding of what it would take to have an electoral presence – we never shut the door to electoral activity. We said we would run candidates who are accountable to the Labor Party when we had any constituency where we had the capacity to run a credible election. This meant that you had to have a substantial support from the labor movement in that constituency. It didn't have to be unanimous, but it had to show that you had substantial support. You had to show that you had the capacity to run an election down to the precinct level, show that you had that kind of serious organizing capacity, and that you had structures in place to hold that candidate accountable to that constituency. I think that's what it would take to run a real candidate. Anything else is just kind of self-serving, a Green Party-type model. If you can't even put out enough poll watchers to cover every precinct in an election campaign, and you can't call on a substantial portion of the labor movement to come out and support your candidate, you're not building anything, and there'll be little that remains afterwards. So, I think one of the biggest contributions that the Labor Party's experience has made is in thinking about elections and what it would take to run effective candidacies in elections.

You talked a lot about what you called the "strategic defeat" and how it "changed the political calculus" for the Labor party by the late 1990s/early 2000s. Can you go a little further on what changed and why, and the effects of it?

The only reason the Labor Party was at all viable in the 1990s was that there was a movement that had come to fruition that wanted to revitalize the labor movement and to rebuild and reorganize the labor movement. It sort of reached its peak with the Sweeny election in the AFL-CIO and this new blossoming with the academic community. You had a labor movement that briefly came together, first around finally figuring out how to hold the line to some degree against the corporate assault in the workplace with brilliant corporate campaigns. And it kind of pushed aside a lot of the interests of the Cold War and the link to U.S. imperial policy. It put organizing as the main priority of the labor

movement. We really thought that we were going to be able to organize a million new workers a year. That was the commitment. It was part of this revitalized movement. And we didn't. We lost that moment. We weren't able to revitalize the labor movement in a way that helped it to expand. So, if your calculus is that you need to build a Labor Party movement on that core that's revitalizing the labor movement, and you foresee the labor movement continuing to grow and double in size over the next decade, then that becomes a real conceivable idea, that the Labor Party movement would grow along with that movement. But when that revitalization of the labor movement didn't pan out, it was no longer conceivable that you could continue to do this transformative Labor Party project. It took us a few years to realize that. I think that the revitalization of the labor movement was pretty much over by the late 1990s, and it probably took us another two or three years to realize what that meant to the Labor Party movement.

PART II: PARTY LIFE AND INTERNAL DEBATES

Let's take a step back to get a bird's eye overview of the Labor Party's development over time. If you had to periodize the history of the Labor Party, to give it a chronology in which you designate important turning points and distinct phases within its lifespan, how would you do so? What did its evolution look like, and what characterized its different periods?

I'd say we can break it down into three phases. The first period would be from 1992 to 1998. This was a period of growth and expansion. We recruited leaders and organizations, established a party structure and principles, and worked at becoming a potent force within the labor movement. The second phase would be from 1998 to 2002, and that was marked by stabilization and stagnation. During this time we worked at developing an internal party life and expanding our organizing capacity. We experimented with programs and campaigns to build the party and developed more stable leadership structures and a routine party life. Individual membership continued to grow, especially in union affiliates with internal organizing programs, but union affiliations began to stagnate (this reflected the receding of the brief mid-1990s upsurge of the labor movement). We had no new national unions affiliated after 1998.

The third period was one of decline, and that lasted from 2002 to 2007. During this time the labor movement suffered a series of strategic defeats. The stolen election of 2000 and the scapegoating of Ralph Nader created a reaction against independent parties and "spoiler" candidacies. The horrendous policies of the Bush administration engendered an "anyone but Bush" mindset that closed the door to political initiatives that wanted to do more than elect Democrats in the next election cycle. Tony Mazzocchi, our National Organizer, died in 2002, and the Labor Party lost his visionary leadership and the tremendous respect that he received from all levels of the labor movement. The labor movement also split into two federations in 2005. Deindustrialization continued to gut many of the unions that were the core of the Labor Party. With all this, the Party ceased renewing individual memberships and union affiliations in 2007.

Who constituted the actually-existing base of the Labor Party during its early years? Who did it see as its target base to bring in, and how did it hope to appeal to those constituents?

At its peak, the Labor Party affiliates included six national unions and over 500 regional and local union bodies—probably close to 20% of the institutional labor movement. Much of this support did not rise above the level of "resolutionary politics": motions of formal support passed at conventions or union meetings, payment of affiliation fees and the assignment of one or two union officials to attend Labor Party events. But many unions made a much more serious commitment. Thousands of union members participated in our "Corporate Power and the American Dream" education program. Local unions signed up members to make regular contributions through payroll deductions and mobilized members to participate in our campaigns for a constitutional right to a job, single payer

healthcare, free higher education and workers' rights. Individual membership fluctuated between 15,000 and 20,000. Most were union members but many were from unions that were not formal affiliates of the Labor Party.
The plan was to build a strong base within the trade union movement, open up relationships and communications across union jurisdictional lines and move that base into working class communities where we could, through one-on-one organizing, build a working class constituency that was unified around the Labor Party's program, "A Call for Economic Justice", which was an eloquent illustration of what politics would look like if it was conducted on behalf of the vast majority of Americans who worked for a living.

How would you describe the internal organization of the Labor Party?

The Convention was the supreme governing body of the Labor Party (there were three Conventions: 1996, 1998 and 2002). It set the overall policy and direction of the Labor Party and appointed an Interim National Committee (INC) that directed the affairs of the Labor Party between conventions. Representation at Conventions was through union delegations (national unions, regional and central labor bodies, local unions and "worker supportive organizations" could all elect and send delegates). Labor Party Chapters—formal, geographic based Labor Party organizations consisting of individual members and unions in a defined area—could also elect delegates. Provisions were also made to allow individual members not represented by a chapter to participate in an "at large" delegation. Voting was weighted by the size of the union or chapter represented.

The INC consisted of 30 or more leaders from various unions and affiliates. Efforts were made to ensure racial, gender, geographic and occupational diversity and to accommodate various points of view. The INC could co-opt additional members to fill vacancies, maintain diversity, and provide representation for significant new affiliates. The INC appointed the National Organizer and other officers of the Labor Party. The National Organizer directed the Party's day-to-day affairs.

Each Chapter was required to adopt a constitution and bylaws that conformed to the principles of accountability and democratic governance. The National Party directed and resourced major campaigns and projects, published a newspaper and activist newsletter. Chapters and union-based Labor Party affiliates often initiated and ran their own projects and campaigns with little support or direction from the national organization. For example, Chapters in Massachusetts, Maine and Florida initiated and ran non-binding referenda on single-payer healthcare.

Union-based Labor Party initiatives were often quite autonomous as unions have their own internal organization, leadership, and priorities. They often focused on membership education and mobilization. The national Labor Party ran campaigns such as an annual membership drive and a nationally syndicated call-in radio program in support of the Just Health Care campaign that many unions participated in.

How did chapters relate to the national leadership and a national agenda?

Chapters were entitled to four regional seats on the INC and national Chapter conventions were held to coordinate their work. Six states also established state-level labor party organizations to coordinate the work of the Chapters and union affiliates on a state-level. Chapter experiences were quite mixed. Some were basically associations of union affiliates that worked to coordinate regional work and allocate resources. Others developed a substantial organizing presence on their own behalf and initiated and ran their own campaigns. Still others devolved into sectarian debating societies.

Supporting chapter activities and resolving chapter disputes consumed an inordinate amount of the

resources of the national party. The role and functions of chapters was never really clear. They developed somewhat spontaneously as a holding ground for individual members who were not in unions or from unaffiliated unions. The vision was that they would eventually be the precinct level political organizations of an electoral and activist party. But, at a time when the main task of the Labor Party was to build density and presence inside the labor movement, chapter functions were often not all that integrated into the strategic work of the Party. Some chapters were actually undermining that strategic work as incessant internal conflict actually drove away trade union activists. The New York City Chapter—at one time the largest Labor Party organization in the U.S. with nearly 1,200 members—was dissolved by the national party after a long, acrimonious internal dispute. The Buffalo Chapter was suspended for violating the Labor Party's electoral policy and endorsing a candidate running in a Democratic primary.

This might be difficult to answer because it's so general, but for people who were never able to experience being active in the Labor Party, can you describe what daily life and struggle was like for party builders? What were their concerns and how were these concerns embedded in their everyday work and the party's internal life?

The several thousand Labor Party activists recruited new members in their workplace or community, distributed the party newspaper and other written materials, organized community forums, hosted national speakers, and participated in educational programs. Many worked in various door-to-door organizing campaigns around a right to a job, just health care, free higher education, and local initiatives. They organized demonstrations and solidarity actions for workers on strike. They participated in discussion and debates about party strategy and tactics and attended local, regional and national meetings and conventions. The Labor Party also had a vigorous cultural life, sponsoring concerts, plays, movie screenings, celebrations and dances.

The DC Labor Film Fest, the nation's premier labor film festival, was launched by the Labor Party and the DC Metro Labor Council in 2001.

What was the racial composition of the Labor Party membership at its height? Its composition in terms of sex?

We never did a demographic study of the membership, but I would guess that about 30% were people of color and probably about a third of the membership were women. That was probably reflected up through the leadership of the Labor Party. I think that the base membership of the Labor Party tended to come from the old industrial sectors, and that tended to be more male and whiter than some of the service employee unions.

Why do you think that these sectors were disproportionately drawn to the Labor Party? And how would you measure the response of service sector and retail unions — who have experienced more recent growth and whose demographics reflect broader shifts among the unionized working class — to the Labor Party idea?

In the 1990s, the old-line industrial and transportation unions (and, to a lesser extent, the building trades) were the ones most affected by neoliberal globalization. They had been getting pounded throughout the 1980s. Many of them still bore a pale resemblance to their CIO origins so they had more of an internal life and structures of accountability than the large, regional, staff-driven unions in the service and public sectors. The labor party idea really resonated with leaders and activists in this sector. Public workers in the 1990s were still winning non-concessionary contracts and their bargaining rights were expanding. Many of the traditional unions in the retail sector were still in their pre-Wal-Mart delusional phase where they thought they could use their control of the local labor market to enforce some stability. These were mainly top-down unions with little interest in

mobilizing around a social unionist vision. The SEIU was leading an effort to organize new workers in healthcare and service industries. In the 1990s this work was very dynamic and progressive and hadn't yet embraced a class collaborationist union model. There were lots of connections between this new unionism and the Labor Party and a number of these local and regional unions were affiliates, but these unions, by and large, were also organized in a top-down fashion. This meant that participation was mainly limited to officials and staffers and very few of these unions embraced the more expansive educational and mobilization projects that we were involved with in our core unions. Of course, this meant that our base was weakest among the sections of the labor movement that were expanding and among the sectors of the working class—Latinos, women, immigrants—who would be stepping up in the 21st century. And for the unions in these sectors, their failure to embrace the Labor Party and social unionism meant that they were unprepared for the neoliberal assaults on them that intensified early in the new century.

There was an unexpected rift at the founding convention around the issue of abortion rights. An immigrant farm workers' group, the Farm Labor Organizing Committee, opposed including this plank in the party constitution and threatened to walk out over it. The conflict was resolved, or finessed, when delegates agreed to not initially use the exact word "abortion" in the constitution while still defending the right to choose in other language. Can you talk a little bit about this, and more generally how the Labor Party sought to navigate divisions like this among its membership?

Just like a union in an organizing drive, you have to build trust, unity, and tolerance around the core issues of class and power first. People will respect and honor concerns arising out of the diverse experiences of their fellow workers if they view all workers as part of a class with common concerns and needs. The real achievement of the abortion debate was not that it was finessed by a judicious choice of words. Rather it was that its conclusion was crafted, agreed to and owned by workers who had strongly held opinions on this issue and that they were willing to put them aside for the sake of a broader unity.

I think the idea was to let people work it out. They're going to make the right decisions. I can recall a debate we once had on the National Council of the Labor Party that we had to take a stand on Clinton's bombing of Serbia during the Yugoslav crisis. And you know, it just struck me: what difference does it make whether we speak out on this or not? We have no power to effect that discussion or that debate. We ought to be talking about how we can develop the power so that we can influence those decisions rather than debating this issue in this sterile way that does nothing except maybe make you feel good that you took a stand on this thing. That was the thinking around a lot of these debates. You can have a really beautiful program that touched all of the talking points of the liberal-left, that made everybody feel good, but people didn't have ownership over that program and didn't see how it was capable of building movements necessary to achieve the results. It's just another pie in the sky.

The first major campaign of the Labor Party as a national group was for a 28th Amendment to the Constitution that guaranteed a job at a decent wage for everyone. Can you describe this campaign and why the Labor Party took it up? Looking back on it, what is your balance sheet?

The 28th Amendment Campaign was meant to ignite social movement organizing around a core working class issue using a non-electoral model. It was designed to encourage one-on-one organizing and constituency building and to promote a unified party life beyond union jurisdictions. It generated a lot of activity right after the Party's founding and succeeded in melding together an activist core. But, in retrospect, it was "a bridge too far." The idea that the government could and should guarantee everyone who wants to work a right to a job was part of the mainstream political

discourses right through the 1970s. But 20 years of neoliberalism undermined the very notion that such a thing was possible. The campaign failed to catch fire in working class communities and even most of the activists did not believe that an actual constitutional amendment was possible in any conceivable time frame.

The Free Higher Ed campaign was one of the Labor Party's more exciting projects. Can you explain what it was and why you initiated it?

Free Higher Ed was a brilliant organizing initiative. It came out of the experiences of the earlier generation with the GI Bill and how that helped create a whole system of economic security for a huge section of the working class in the U.S. It was just a way – as Tony always said – to seize the terms of the debate. Why shouldn't higher education be free? What would a world look like that had free higher education? It was clearly something that would resonate with people on all kinds of levels. And it's an achievable demand. You don't need a new millennia to achieve it. You can look at the numbers. It's not much more per year than what the U.S. has spent in Iraq and Afghanistan over the past eleven years. It's certainly within the capacity of the society to do it.

So those were exactly the kinds of issues that we felt could really build a movement. The fact that it didn't was very indicative of how much the vision and the sense of the possible had deteriorated in the social movements. Our understanding was that the natural supporters of this would be the academic unions and broader groups of students and aspiring students and their families. People responded to it very quickly, but they never believed that they were capable of achieving this in any real way, so they didn't integrate it into the work they did. They kept going back to the day-to-day defensive fights over holding on to Pell grants and preventing the elimination of academic departments. All of the gritty defensive fights rather than using free higher education as a broader organizing principle.

Interestingly, the Labor Party had one of its strongest bases in South Carolina. Can you explain why this was so, and also how South Carolina emerged as a testing ground for the party's overall base-building strategy in the 2000s?

South Carolina's small and beleaguered labor movement was led by people who had no illusions about the nature of the two-party system. The state Democratic Party was openly anti-labor, supported right to work legislation and was particularly disrespectful to its core voting bloc in the African-American communities. In 2006, the labor movement almost universally supported an initiative to certify the South Carolina Labor Party as a state party. Activists chose to use the petitioning campaign for ballot status as an organizing opportunity to engage in one-on-one conversations with working people (almost all of whom were not union members) around the state. They collected over 16,000 signatures from workers in every county in the state. The founding convention set up structures to run candidates and hold them accountable to a Labor Party organization governed by workers and their unions.
Labor Party leaders hoped that the proof that we could build a party of labor in the heart of the right to work South would inspire the national labor movement to both put real resources into the South Carolina effort and to revive and renew their support for the Labor Party nationally. Unfortunately, the labor movement was in such an advanced state of decline at this point that little new support or resources materialized. The lack of resources and the rise of Obamamania, particularly among the state's African Americans, made it impossible for the party to launch a serious candidacy in the 2008 elections and the party died on the vine.

PART III: THE LABOR PARTY AND LEFT STRATEGY

The Labor Party's first few years overlapped with the growth of the Green Party in the late

1990s, the 2000 Nader campaign, and the rise of an "anti-globalization" protest movement most memorably illustrated in the 1999 Battle of Seattle. Clearly the Labor Party was part of a broader moment in American politics where people were beginning to explore alternatives. How did the party relate to everything else going on?

There was an organizational ferment around the need for independent politics that the Labor Party was part of. We viewed our priority as the development of a class-based politics rooted in the labor movement. We did not think it fruitful to encourage or participate in the perennial debates among various leftists about party building and politics. Those projects had proven to produce nothing but bringing the same people together in a different configuration. Our focus was on moving the labor movement away from its lockstep relationship with the Democratic Party and organizing a new working class constituency rather than mobilizing the same activist base.

That said, the Labor Party maintained amicable relations with many of the new politics groups that were emerging at the time. The Green Party adopted most of the Labor Party economic program and National Organizer Tony Mazzocchi spoke at their 2000 Convention that nominated Ralph Nader for president. The Labor Party viewed the emergence of an anti-globalization movement as a very hopeful sign and Labor Party leaders and members were active participants in the Battle of Seattle. We worked to establish cooperation and unity between unions and the anti-globalization movement.

What was the Labor Party doing differently than the Greens that, in your opinion, made it a better model, one more worthy of support from the left?

I don't want to go to war with any of these other party-building efforts, because we'll all hopefully come together some day. But I think that the fundamental problem with some of the Left is that they see politics as more of a question of personal redemption, bearing witness, and lifestyle choice rather than a real organizing dilemma about how to build power. I think structures like the Green Party allow people to feel personally good about their political choices, that they're able to vote for somebody that represents their values even though that person has no capacity to not only win power but to even affect the terms of debate. So, I think ultimately it's kind of an evolving, downward spiral of political practice and reflects sort of a powerlessness of the left in this moment. I think the Labor Party model was very different and was not about reorganizing the already-existing left. It was about building a broader constituency and using the institutional structures of the labor movement to build a broader class-based constituency that could then enter electoral politics from a position of power rather than a position of "playing politics."

Historically, the American left has played an important role in building the labor movement. Labor Party organizers knew that the initiative would attract a broad range of left radicals, from serious party builders to others who might view it mostly as a platform to preach and recruit. How did the party hope to benefit from the best that the left could offer – dedication, militancy, vision, commitment to principle – while also being careful to distance itself from behavior that might alienate the base that the party wanted to attract?

Party organizers explicitly rejected the adoption of rules and policies that would have excluded or marginalized left organizations or individuals. They felt that many of them would have a role to play in broadening the perspective of the Party and could be a counter weight to narrow and parochial thinking. They felt that their presence would not prove disruptive as long as the party was growing robustly. Once the party began to stagnate, many sectarian organizations stepped in the vacuum and began to dominate internal party debate. This drove other working class activists and labor organizations away and hastened the party's decline.

So in your opinion, how can the radical left help rather than hurt party building efforts?

I think that there's a model of destructive left sectarianism that played itself out in the Labor Party and in a lot of other social movements. I don't have a lot experience in that kind of structured left movement-building world, so I could be off on this, but I think it comes from a sort of misguided vanguardism. Somehow the people involved in those movements think that their small party has magically perceived the overall course of the international proletarian movement from start to finish and that there's an urgency that they have to impose that view and push that on a broader movement. And, in addition, I think you have an elevation of the contradictions with other left sectarian organizations into the primary fight that they have to take up, and this means that they can't be effective organizers and effective party-builders in a broader movement, and this in fact drives a lot of people away from the process.

The experience I had that really pointed this out to me was with the New York chapter, which at one point was the largest chapter in the Labor Party. It just fell apart over these kinds of factional debates. They would meet into the night, these chapter meetings would just be endless debates about things, with reams of activist literature, and it just drove people away. It didn't connect with what they wanted to do and what they saw as the role of the Labor Party.

The positive experience would be a conception of left politics that would understand that this is a time when we need to develop a real core within a working-class movement, and that they need to listen very carefully to peoples' felt concerns and life experiences, and integrate that into a broader narrative, and be respectful of the institutions and structures that working people will create in the process.

When thinking about alternatives to the two-party system, a labor party is not the only option. Ralph Nader's presidential campaign in 2000 reached a wide audience with a progressive message. The Green Party was on the ascendant in the 1990s and, while it suffered a subsequent decline, it did represent a possible model of a left-liberal third party. We've also seen a wave of new leftwing and even anti-capitalist parties emerge in Europe – SYRIZA in Greece, the Left Bloc in Portugal, and so on. Some of these formations have built up significant influence and achieved double-digit electoral results. For you, what makes the Labor Party model preferable to these alternatives for the U.S,?

The Green Party has been running independent political candidacies for over 20 years and has very little to show for it. Their experience proves the ineffectiveness of trying to build an anti-capitalist party by running under-resourced candidates in elections. Likewise the multi-year experiences of the various state "Working Family Parties" show that the "fusion approach" of cross-endorsing mainstream candidates has little effect beyond the tactical. These parties inevitably become the creatures of the mainstream parties they seek to influence. The fact remains that only the labor movement has the resources and organizing capacity to launch and maintain an independent class-based political movement. The launching of a labor party remains the great unfinished business of the U.S. working class.

The experiences of the European and South American left parties are very interesting. However, I would maintain that all of these parties emerge from a milieu of independent class politics and the betrayal of the working class by already existing labor-based parties. They do not reflect the conditions faced by the U.S. working class.

Can you go into that a bit more, why you don't think these European and South American models speak to the conditions in the U.S.?

I'm not a scholar of those movements, so it's more impressionistic. I'm very excited about some of these European movements on the left. I think they offer a lot of hope. But my impression is that

they came together around the betrayal of class politics by already-existing social democratic and left political formations. That isn't really where we're at in the U.S. We haven't yet had a working-class party that could betray the working class. We're at a much earlier stage of evolution, and while I think that we could learn a lot from the experiences of SYRIZA, I think that it's a little naïve. They're on a much different level of understanding and sophistication. We have to build a party around working-class issues that's broad and encompassing and then there will be struggle. We need to learn from the experiences and particularly the betrayals and the cooption of a lot of the labor-based political parties over the last hundred years. We have to learn from that and try to prevent some of those errors. But to think that we could jump into this post-social democratic party building that's going on in Europe and to some degree in Latin American, I think, is naïve and overly hopeful.

What did you think of the Occupy movement? How do you think people who want to rebuild a militant labor movement and an effective left should have related to Occupy?

Occupy raised fundamental questions about class and power in ways that engaged millions of Americans. Lacking ideological coherence and organizational presence, it has failed to sustain itself as a movement. It represents the triumph of the testimonial style of politics in the American left.

What did you mean by that, and what would you counterpose?

We discussed it a little bit earlier, but it's basically this idea that just by speaking, bearing testimony, bearing truth to power, you start transforming the world. That doesn't work. It's an important way to begin to organize people, to get people to stand up and talk to one another about their experiences and the structures and policies that have shaped their lives. We do that when we do healthcare organizing all the time. It's very effective, but it's not sufficient. It's the first step to building a movement, not the end result. A movement has to have the capacity to mobilize people around particular issues in a disciplined way and has to have institutional structures that sustain it through times of quietude. It needs to exist beyond the individual outrage that people feel when they're victimized by the system.

PART IV: LOOKING BACK, LOOKING AHEAD

All things considered, what are the main lessons that you take away from the experience of the Labor Party? What worked and what didn't, and why? And how do you think the history of the Labor Party is relevant for us today?

The party-building model works when there is a vital and resurgent labor movement to align it with. It was a mistake to formally launch the Party in 1996. We did not have a critical mass of support within the labor movement nor had we melded together a unified activist core. We would have been better served to continue to define ourselves as an organizing committee (though the pressures to move toward a formal party organization were very great.) We need to encourage a broad and open discussion of Labor Party history and lessons within the labor movement.

As we discussed earlier, the key issue that divided the Labor Party was the question of whether or not to run candidates early on. Opponents, including Mazzocchi, argued that the party would risk alienating the labor leadership because it would be seen as dividing the Democratic vote. They believed the Labor Party needed to first build enough support to legitimately compete in elections before it could run candidates. Supporters believed the Labor Party could only mature, grow in popularity, and distinguish itself through competing in elections and testing out its vision. Looking back, do you still think that not running candidates right away was the correct position?

I think that was the only option. I don't think there was any way we could have run any nationally significant candidate. I mean, maybe in a couple of places we might have run some symbolic candidates. I don't know if that would've changed anything. Towards the end in South Carolina we did really try a model that might have worked had the labor movement continued to grow. That model was based on an understanding that South Carolina was a state where nothing was at stake. It's not a battle ground state in anyway. The Democratic Party was part of the Right to Work regime in South Carolina, and it's also been particularly disrespectful of the African-American community which constituted the largest Democratic voting bloc in the state. And so we really felt there was an opportunity to create an alternative for that party in South Carolina that could have been a symbol for other efforts around the country. But we did that too late with too little to really affect the outcome.

The election issue was central in the party's internal debates throughout its short history. The history of other third party efforts shows that we were absolutely right to adopt a movement building approach to electoral politics. You can't build a labor party without the labor movement and extracting labor from all of its instrumental relationships in a two-party winner-take-all political system remains the greatest political challenge of anyone wanting to build a working class politics.

What do you think was more responsible for the Labor Party's decline – was it internal problems within the project itself, or was it external circumstances, what you call labor's strategic defeat?

Indisputably the strategic defeat of labor at the turn of the century was the major cause of the Labor Party's decline.

What criticisms of the Labor Party do you think have been the most valid and what have been the least valid? What do you think the Labor Party got right, and what did it get wrong or not-so-right?

Our critique of the two parties of the bosses was absolutely spot on. As was our critique of the other failed strategies to building independent working class politics: the reform-the-Democrats crowd, the Green Party approach, the fusion model, and the syndicalisms of the right and left. And our party-building model – rooting ourselves in the network of working class institutions and leaders – will, I think, stand the test of time. We certainly made our share of mistakes. Most of them would not have been fatal, however, if the mid-90's labor upsurge had continued to build momentum. In that context, we found it impossible to craft a strategy to really extract the labor movement from its instrumental relationships with the Democratic Party. A friend of mine said, you know, we won the ideological war but we weren't able to translate that into a political reality. We were able to get a huge section of the labor movement to agree that the bosses have two parties and that we need one of our own. But we were not able to translate that into an organizational strategy about how to extract ourselves from those relationships, especially in a time of retreat, when those relationships are particularly important

Let's imagine that the Labor Party or something like it was initiated today. What would be the best prospects for an institutional home that could serve the role that the OCAW did before? And what if anything would you do differently?

There's not a significant national union in a position to put the kind of resources and organizing capacity into the Labor Party that the OCAW and several other unions did in the 1990s, so that's why the door is closed right now to that. I think this is a time where we've got to reorganize and begin to discuss and debate what it would take to move it forward. I think our fate is inextricably tied to the fate of a broader working-class movement, whether that's a revitalization of the current institutional

labor movement or whether some of that takes place outside of those structures as new movements. I think we've got to really position ourselves to them. Working people need a number of things. They need a militant and democratic union. They need an independent political voice. And these things are all kind of intertwined. That makes it really difficult from where we are right now, but no less urgent than before.

Are you saying that a Labor Party today would need to root itself more in efforts that seek to organize workers in non-traditional ways – workers' centers, community groups, and the like? Could those kinds of groups play a bigger role that you anticipated in the 1990s?

We would have to incorporate these non-traditional working class organizations because that is where the center of gravity is moving toward. It's important to remember, however, that the growth of these groups actually represents a step back for the working class: you can't bargain with Wal-Mart on a national basis, nor can you protect union supporters in a traditional organizing drive, so you develop a guerilla, hit-and-run style that hopefully can eliminate some of the most egregious practices and sustain an organizing presence. You can't get the state to enforce its own weak-ass labor laws, so you organize restaurant workers to take direct action against wage theft, and so on. Nonetheless, these initiatives represent a new and hopeful dynamism and there is a slowly developing body of practice that has reached a point where we can begin to understand how to build these movements and scale them up. The immigration rights movement is especially significant since that movement is, at its core, a worker empowerment movement. The biggest danger these movements face is that they will be co-opted by the foundation-types who would push for their integration into the neoliberal consensus and replace class struggle with do-goodism and identity politics.

What about the question I asked before about what you would do differently this time?

I think perhaps we should have spent more time building a force of working-class organizers when we were at our peak and most connected to a diverse range of communities and constituencies. We had this educational program called "Corporate Power and the American Dream," that thousands of unionists and other working-class folks went through. Perhaps we should have emphasized those types of programs more and found more types of projects for those folks to do once they went through the training. That would have created a more on-the-ground presence for us and a more structured set of relationships for working-class activists to connect with each other. We tried some of that, of course. We tried to develop a national campaign around a right to a job, things like that, with varying degrees of success. But I think that a more systematic approach might have been able to leave more of an organizational presence if we had found ways to activate that kind of working-class activist base beyond union jurisdictional lines and implanted it in some working class communities.

You mentioned the revitalization of the "broader working-class movement" as a precondition for the revival of something like the Labor Party. Labor activists looking to rebuild the union movement today emphasize different strategies. The people at Labor Notes advocate rank-and-file struggle against both employers and traditional union leadership to renew the movement from below. Strategic corporate research tries to demystify how businesses are organized so that labor can construct effective campaigns that target their vulnerabilities. Some emphasize building union density while others focus on mobilizing existing membership. These are just a few visions and they are by no means mutually exclusive. Where does your own vision for rebuilding the labor movement fit in?

A revitalized labor movement has to be able to do three things: organize the unorganized, practice militant and democratic trade unionism, and represent working class interests in the political realm.

These things are beyond the capacity of the current labor movement that can do little more than circle the wagons and defend itself by hurling pieces of its past accomplishments at its opponents. The jury is out over whether the current movement can transform and rebuild itself. It is surely at a tipping point and some of the impetus for change has to come from outside of the traditional labor movement. I think that some of the worker-center and human rights organizing initiatives have accumulated some interesting experiences that we need to begin to sum-up. Likewise, some of the efforts around building international solidarity are beginning to bear fruit and build power and could help bring new life to the movement. A revitalized labor movement is central to anything else we do and our efforts will not be well served if we demonize the "actually existing labor movement" and drive away those who need to be in the room to start any conceivable revitalization project. Nor is it helpful to engage in one-size fits all sand castle building. This crisis is structural, deep seated, and multi-faceted. It will not be solved by embracing the latest facile solution (EFCA! Occupy! Strike! etc.).

Scott Walker's victory in the Wisconsin recall last year sparked some soul-searching over the fate of the labor movement. It was a demoralizing situation where 38% of voters from union households supported Walker and labor once again poured millions into the Democratic Party with little to show. What was your assessment of the situation?

Wisconsin was one more step in labor's long decline. The fight was probably lost the previous year when Walker was elected governor with control of both houses. The fightback was inspiring and indicative of the depth of support for trade union issues among a broad portion of the working class. Even the 38% figure shows that our weakened, demobilized labor movement still is able to move white working class union families to support progressive issues at a rate that is 15% higher than the general population.

You currently head up the Labor Campaign for Single Payer Healthcare. Can you talk a little bit about this? How is the fight for single payer healthcare a labor issue?

The healthcare issue is at the core of the crisis faced by U.S. labor. It is caused by the decline of the collective bargaining regime and the dismantling of the social insurance model. Its solution requires a movement powerful enough to confront and defeat concentrated corporate power and calls into question all of labor's political relationships and assumptions. Labor leadership on this issue helps bring together the best and the brightest labor activists and helps define the labor movement as a social movement fighting on behalf of the interests of all working people.

We launched the Labor Campaign for Single Payer just prior to Obama's first inauguration because we knew that the healthcare issue was going to move to center stage. Many of the conveners were active in the Labor Party's Just Health Care Campaign. Veteran labor organizer Jerry Tucker (who died in October of 2012) also brought his vast network of contacts to the table. We framed the fight for the right to healthcare as a fight against corporate power and demanded that labor take the lead. At the 2009 AFL-CIO Convention, we succeeded in passing a resolution that puts the Federation back on record as supporting a single-payer, Medicare for all solution to the healthcare crisis facing the working class (they had abandoned this position during the debate over the Clinton healthcare reforms in the early '90s). Eleven national unions and nine state labor federations joined the Campaign. We then urged and supported efforts to encourage labor to put real mobilizing muscle behind this support.

Quite frankly, once the Affordable Care Act was signed into law in 2010, I thought our Campaign would go into decline. Quite the opposite has happened. That we have continued to gain momentum is an indicator of the severity of the healthcare crisis and a growing understanding that the Affordable Care Act will do little to solve it for most working people and, for many unions, it may

actually make things worse. We just had our largest ever National Strategy Conference and it attracted some of the bestfighters in the labor movement. Chicago Teachers Union President Karen Lewis was there. She talked to us about building the kind of social movement that beat back Rahm Emmanuel in Chicago. We heard from a trade unionist who worked at the French national healthcare system who made the connections of our fight to the international struggle against austerity regimes. I wish we had the capacity to launch similar campaigns around the right to education, full employment, a working class approach to environmental justice, et cetera.

I'd like to end by asking you about the prospects for a Labor Party today. Is it still desirable, and moreover, realistic? Do you think we are living in the kind of moment where momentum can be created to build some form of mass labor party? And if so, how would it be the same or different from what you and others envisioned nearly 20 years ago?

In many ways it would appear that this is the perfect time for a labor party movement to revive. We are in the fifth year of the worst economic downturn since the Depression, working class wages have stagnated for over a generation, inequality is at unprecedented extremes and both major political parties are wedded to neoliberal and austerity politics. Working people are desperate for real solutions.

Yet there is not a single national union that would commit the resources and organizing focus to a labor party movement in the way that several unions did in the mid-1990s. The failure of the labor party movement is bound up with the crisis and decline of the organized labor movement. The labor party model remains the only plausible way to launch and sustain an effort for independent working class politics. While the challenges are even greater today than they were 20 years ago, the need is also greater.

There are no shortcuts. The movement to build a labor party is inextricably linked to the project of transforming and revitalizing the entire U.S. labor movement. It is inconceivable to envision almost any progressive initiative succeeding without the support and participation of a vigorous and engaged labor movement. Today, such a movement's very survival is at stake. As we work to rebuild it, we have an opportunity to correct the policies and strategies that contributed to its failure and to work to assure that a focus on independent working class politics is part of its core identity.

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